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## ITALIAN TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING TALENTED ATYPICAL STUDENTS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

## PERCEPCIJA ITALIJANSKIH UČITELJEV GLEDE NADARJENIH NETIPIČNIH ŠTUDENTOV: PREDHODNA ŠTUDIJA

### ABSTRACT

Atypical students (i.e., workers, athletes, artists, and Erasmus) could encounter difficulties in balancing their educational path. Therefore, this preliminary study aimed to investigate the actual academic support and the potential teachers' approach toward atypical students in Italy. A twelve-item questionnaire was developed to ascertain differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the university teachers' perceptions towards student being also Artists, Athletes, Erasmus, and Workers. Artists were perceived to have the lowest flexibility provisions for class attendance ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and for exam sessions ( $p < 0.01$ ) with respect to other student typologies. Conversely, teachers reported to be available to provide flexibility, especially to Workers and Athletes ( $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, respondents declared to be available to provide additional work in case of missed class attendance, considering on-line reception, tutoring support, and e-learning services as appropriate tools, especially for Workers and Athletes ( $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, teachers claimed that Artists and Athletes should be valorised ( $p < 0.01$ ), although they are not aware of them in the class ( $p < 0.01$ ). In general, Artists resulted the less recognized atypical student category, whereas positive teachers' perceptions towards student-athletes emerged. These preliminary findings call for a substantial improvement of dual career paths in Italy.

*Key words:* Student-athletes, dual career, sport, education, survey

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### IZVLEČEK

Netipični študenti (npr. zaposleni, športniki, umetniki in sodelujoči v programu Erasmus) bi lahko imeli težave z usklajevanjem svoje izobraževalne poti. Zato je bil cilj te predhodne raziskave preučiti dejansko akademsko podporo in potencialni pristop pedagogov k netipičnim študentom v Italiji. Pripravili smo vprašalnik z dvanajstimi vprašanji, s katerimi smo želeli ugotoviti razlike ( $p < 0.05$ ) med univerzitetnimi pedagogi glede njihovega odnosa do študentov, ki so obenem tudi umetniki, športniki, udeleženci programa Erasmus in zaposleni. Ugotovili smo, da je umetnikom omogočeno najmanj fleksibilnosti glede njihove prisotnosti na predavanjih ( $p < 0.0001$ ) in opravljanja izpitov ( $p < 0.01$ ) v primerjavi z drugimi tipologijami študentov. Nasprotno pa so pedagogi poročali, da fleksibilnost omogočajo zlasti zaposlenim in športnikom ( $p < 0.01$ ). Poleg tega so anketiranci izjavili, da so razpoložljivi za dodatno delo v primeru neprisotnosti na predavanjih, in kot primerna orodja navedli spletni sprejem, mentorsko podporo in storitve e-učenja, zlasti za delavce in športnike ( $p < 0.05$ ). Nazadnje so pedagogi izjavili, da bi morali biti umetniki in športniki cenjeni ( $p < 0.01$ ), čeprav se tega v učnem procesu ne zavedajo ( $p < 0.01$ ). Na splošno so umetniki najmanj priznana netipična kategorija študentov, opazna pa je naklonjenost pedagogov do študentov športnikov. Te predhodne ugotovitve narekujejo potrebo po izboljšanju dvojne poklicne poti v Italiji.

*Gljučne besede:* študenti športniki, dvojna poklicna pot, šport, izobraževanje, anketa

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## Introduction

Atypical students (i.e., workers, artists, athletes, and Erasmus) enrolled in University courses present specific needs for accomplishing their academic requirements. In Italy, the atypical profile of the student worker is well recognized (Italian Republic, 1970) and specific policies have to be adopted at working and academic levels to allow the arrangement of job and study schedules. Despite working students tend to increase their graduation rate, they may improve their employment opportunities after graduation (Hakkinen, 2006). Another recognized profile of atypical student is the Erasmus student (i.e., students attending one or two semesters in foreign European institutions under the Erasmus exchange programme) who is supported by consolidated institutional academic agreements (European Commission, 2013). Conversely, not having a recognized status as atypical students, talented artists and athletes are not supported by specific policies and might encounter difficulties in their educational path because extra-curricular artistic or athletic activities might require around 20–30 h-week<sup>-1</sup> in addition to around 30 h-week<sup>-1</sup> of study (Aquilina, 2013).

In Europe, sport is usually organized at club level, with no or limited relationship with the educational system (Aquilina & Henry, 2010). However, the European Parliament has recently embraced several actions to promote the dialogue between sport and educational bodies to establish dual career (i.e., the combination of sport and education) pathways for student-athletes (European Commission, 2007, 2011, 2012), and to promote the transition from sport into the labour market. In particular, the European Guidelines on Dual Career of Athletes (European Commission, 2012) urges academic and sport bodies of the Member States to establish dual career programs and to monitor the effectiveness of their dual career paths (European Union Work Plan for Sport 2014–2017). Although in some European countries student-athletes could benefit from specific academic services, in Italy no formal structures for adapted academic curricula are in place (Aquilina, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Henry, 2013).

Dual career is a complex phenomenon incorporating several intertwined dimensions of student-athletes' life (Guidotti, Cortis, & Capranica, 2014). In particular, micro (i.e., individual characteristics of the student-athlete), meso (i.e., interpersonal relationships of student-athletes with family, peers, educators, coaches and managers), macro (i.e., the sport and education environments), and global (i.e., organizational and Governmental policies) factors play a crucial role in determining a successful dual career. In the last decade, the scientific community has mainly focused on personal and policy factors affecting dual career, providing information regarding psychological aspects (i.e., Guidotti, Minganti, Cortis, Piacentini, Tessitore & Capranica, 2013; Lupo, Tessitore, Capranica, Rauter & Doupona-Topic, 2012; Lupo et al., 2014), athletes' life and their career transitions (i.e., Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Wylleman & Reints, 2010), evaluation of dual career programmes (i.e., van Rens, Elling & Reijgersberg, 2012; McCormack & Walseth, 2013), political/organizational related aspects of the sport and educational environments (i.e., Henry, 2013; Aquilina & Henry, 2010), issues and challenges of a dual career path (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2014; Aquilina, 2013), and athletic development practices (i.e., Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014; Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011). Conversely, there is a lack of research considering the influence of interpersonal relationships in determining the sustainable combination of sport and educational commitments in European student-athletes. Especially in countries characterized by *laissez faire*/no formal dual career structures (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Henry, 2013), the teachers' perception of student-athletes could be a relevant aspect for the accomplishment of a dual career. In fact, traditional student

development theories highlighted that both formal and informal student-faculty interactions are key factors in determining the academic success and overall college experiences, academic and social activities (Comeaux, 2005).

The literature on the teachers' perception of student-athletes is mainly focused on Northern America institutions (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1993; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995), where the sport and educational systems are strictly linked to favour the achievement of both academic and athletic requirements of this peculiar population (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015). Although, faculty staff has been recommended to create effective opportunities for this population (Harrison, Comeaux, & Pletcha, 2006), teachers demonstrate a divergent perception of student-athletes. In fact, some university professors show a negative approach toward this population (Engstrom et al., 1995), assuming that lacks contact with the campus community (Hamilton & Trolie, 1986), has limited opportunities to engage with faculty and to develop adequate academic competencies (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1993). Conversely, a positive teachers' perception of student-athletes emerged more recently, considering them capable-to-excellent students (Jolly, 2008). Although in Italy the absence of formal cooperation between sport and academic bodies strongly relies on the individual negotiation between student-athletes and teaching staff (Aquilina & Henry, 2010), there is a lack of information on the actual teachers' availability to structure individual and flexible paths for student-athletes enrolled in their courses.

Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the Italian academic professors' opinion regarding flexible dual career paths for atypical students in relation to the provision, if any, of dual career support at their university. In particular, it has been hypothesized that: i) the current Italian academic scenario would be limited in providing effective dual career tools and strategies (i.e., flexibility of class and exams attendance, e-learning and tutoring) for talented atypical students (i.e., artists and student-athletes); and ii) the academic teaching staff's attitude toward talented atypical students would be positive and potentially effective for the development of institutional dual career strategies.

## METHODS

### Experimental approach to the problem

In considering that support services differ in relation to specific typologies of atypical students, the present preliminary study considered the Erasmus and Workers as control groups being well recognized atypical students with specific support for their academic path (European Commission, 2013; Italian Republic, 1970), whereas the Artists and Athletes as experimental groups being not supported by formal structures. Although students may choose an academic path independently from their status, student-athletes could favour a vocational major on sport science, which could allow them to prepare for a future professional career in the sport domain. Therefore, this preliminary study was mainly focused on teachers of Sport Science faculties. In considering differences in education within Italy (Ballas et al., 2012), five Italian Sport Science faculties representing the Northern (i.e., Bologna and Turin), the Centre (i.e., Rome) and the Southern (i.e., Catanzaro and Foggia) geographical areas of Italy were selected.

## Subjects

Using the official websites of the selected academic institutions, an e-mail database was created and 800 professors (i.e., full professors, associate professors, aggregate professors, and teaching staff) were asked to provide their consent to participate in the study before responding to an on-line questionnaire.

## Instrument

Using the focus group method (Kitzinger, 1994), eight main areas in relation to support services and provisions in academic institutions for atypical students were identified: i) flexibility for class attendance; ii) flexibility for exam sessions; iii) on-line timetable of reception; iv) tutoring; v) e-learning; vi) psychological support; vii) additional work in case of missed class attendance; viii) awareness and perception regarding atypical students. In relation to these thematic domains, a structured questionnaire was created to collect data by means of closed items. A large number ( $n=30$ ) of dichotomous items (i.e., possible answers: yes and no) was formulated and submitted to the judgment of ten experts to ascertain the relevance and coherence of each item in relation to the eight identified dimensions. A final 12-items structure was obtained, including items aimed

Table 1. The twelve-item questionnaire.

Item*
1. In my University, there are particular provisions regarding flexibility of the class attendance for the following student categories.
2. Regardless of particular provisions in place in my University, I would be willing to agree on a particular flexibility related to the class attendance for the following student categories.
3. Regardless of particular provisions in place in my University, I would be willing to agree on a recovery process of the missing class attendance for the following student categories.
4. Regardless of particular provisions in place in my University, I would be willing to provide an on-line timetable of reception for the following student categories.
5. In my University, there are special provisions related to the flexibility for the exam sessions for the following student categories.
6. Regardless of particular provisions in place in my University, I would be willing to provide flexibility for the exam sessions for the following student categories.
7. I am aware of special provisions in place in my University regarding the tutoring for the following student categories.
8. Regardless of particular provisions in place in my University, I would agree to promote the activation of an individualized tutoring process for the following student categories.
9. I do believe that my University should provide support for an e-learning process for the following student categories.
10. I do believe that my University should provide a motivational and psychological support for the following student categories.
11. I do believe that my University should valorise the extra-academic skills of the following student categories.
12. I am aware of the presence in my class of the following student categories.

Note: \* Each item requires the participant to provide an answer (yes or no) in relation to each of the following student categories: Artists, Athletes, Erasmus, and Workers.

at: i) ascertain the teachers' awareness of the presence of support services/provisions for atypical students in their academic institutions as well as their presence in class ( $n=4$ ); and ii) verify the teachers' personal availability to provide support services to atypical students independently from the presence or absence of institutional provisions ( $n=8$ ). Before applying the tool, the questionnaire was administered to 10 university professors, who were also interviewed to ascertain item comprehensibility, reasons behind their responses, and to highlight problems, if any. At the end of the interview procedures, the 12-item questionnaire was considered appropriate to be administered to Italian university professors (table 1). Thus, an on-line toll was developed allowing responses to be electronically archived.

### Statistical analysis

Collected data were organized in relation to student typologies. To verify differences between the groups in relation to support services/provisions and teachers' perceptions the chi-square test was applied ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

## RESULTS

Seventy-nine university professors participated in this study (response rate: 10%). Both genders (female=40%; male=60%) were represented in the sample, including full (18%), associate (21%), and aggregate (50%) professors and teaching staff (11%). The majority of the participants represented the northern geographical area (41%) with respect to both the central (31%) and southern (28%) ones.

Results are presented in the table 2. In particular, in considering the provisions of flexibility for class attendance (i.e., item 1) Artists were perceived to have the lowest accessibility to services with respect to the other groups ( $p < 0.0001$ ). In general, teachers declared to be available in relation to attendance flexibility (i.e., item 2) especially for Workers ( $p < 0.01$ ) and Athletes ( $p < 0.01$ ) with respect to Erasmus and Artists students. A similar trend was observed in relation to the flexibility for exam sessions (i.e., item 3), with Artists characterized by the lowest provision of flexibility with respect to other typologies of students ( $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, Erasmus students resulted to be the most recognized student group, even when compared to Workers ( $p = 0.049$ ). Regarding teachers' personal availability for flexibility for exam sessions (i.e., item 4) Artists were perceived to deserve the lowest flexibility with respect to both Athletes ( $p = 0.038$ ) and Workers ( $p = 0.05$ ).

Regarding teachers' personal availability to assign additional work in case atypical student missed class attendance (i.e., item 6), participants reported to be available in relation to all the student groups, especially for Workers and Athletes with respect to other student typologies ( $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, Workers were perceived to deserve the highest accessibility for an on-line timetable of reception (i.e., item 6) with respect to Erasmus and Artists ( $p < 0.05$ ), although a consistent positive perception (89%) emerged also for Athletes.

Regarding other student services, Erasmus students were recognized to have the highest institutional tutoring provisions (i.e., item 7) with respect to the other student typologies ( $p < 0.01$ ), whereas Artists accounted the lowest university professors' availability for tutoring services (i.e., item 8) with respect to the other student groups ( $p < 0.05$ ). Furthermore, Workers and Athletes were perceived in highest need of e-learning provisions (i.e., item 9) with respect to Erasmus and

Artists ( $p < 0.05$ ). Conversely, no need for a psychological support for atypical students emerged (item 10).

Table 2. Results of the questionnaire.

Item	Group	Yes (%)	No (%)	p value
Item 1 Provisions of flexibility for class attendance	Artists	8	92	* # † ( $p < 0.0001$ )
	Athletes	41	59	
	Erasmus	51	49	
	Workers	54	46	
Item 2 Personal availability for flexibility of class attendance	Artists	49	51	* ( $p = 0.001$ ); † ( $p < 0.0001$ )
	Athletes	77	23	
	Erasmus	63	37	† ( $p = 0.004$ )
	Workers	84	16	
Item 3 Provisions of flexibility for exam sessions	Artists	1	99	* ( $p = 0.008$ ); # ( $p < 0.0001$ ); † ( $p = 0.016$ )
	Athletes	11	89	
	Erasmus	22	78	† ( $p = 0.049$ )
	Workers	10	90	
Item 4 Personal availability for flexibility for the exam sessions	Artists	38	62	* ( $p = 0.038$ ); † ( $p = 0.05$ )
	Athletes	54	46	
	Erasmus	41	59	
	Workers	53	47	
Item 5 Personal availability to additional work in case of missed class attendance	Artists	62	38	* ( $p = 0.023$ ); † ( $p = 0.004$ )
	Athletes	78	22	
	Erasmus	66	34	† ( $p = 0.018$ )
	Workers	82	18	
Item 6 Personal availability for an on-line timetable of reception	Artists	80	20	† ( $p = 0.021$ )
	Athletes	89	11	
	Erasmus	82	18	† ( $p = 0.05$ )
	Workers	92	8	
Item 7 Provisions of tutoring services	Artists	5	95	# ( $p < 0.0001$ ); † ( $p < 0.020$ )
	Athletes	13	87	# ( $p = 0.002$ )
	Erasmus	33	67	† ( $p = 0.016$ )
	Workers	16	84	
Item 8 Personal availability for tutoring	Artists	53	47	* ( $p = 0.05$ ); # ( $p = 0.021$ ); † ( $p = 0.001$ )
	Athletes	68	32	
	Erasmus	71	29	
	Workers	77	23	
Item 9 Need for e-learning provisions	Artists	63	37	* ( $p = 0.05$ ); † ( $p = 0.002$ )
	Athletes	77	23	
	Erasmus	66	34	† ( $p = 0.005$ )
	Workers	85	15	
Item 10 Provisions of psychological support	Artists	24	76	
	Athletes	28	72	
	Erasmus	25	75	
	Workers	37	63	
Item 11 Need to valorize the extra-academic skills	Artists	61	39	* ( $p = 0.015$ ); # ( $p = 0.006$ )
	Athletes	78	22	# ( $p < 0.0001$ ); † ( $p = 0.001$ )
	Erasmus	39	61	† ( $p = 0.05$ )
	Workers	54	46	
Item 12 Awareness of the presence of atypical students in class	Artists	14	86	* # † ( $p < 0.0001$ )
	Athletes	51	49	# ( $p = 0.002$ ); † ( $p < 0.0001$ )
	Erasmus	77	23	
	Workers	82	18	

Note: \*difference with respect to Athletes; # difference with respect to Erasmus; † difference with respect to Workers.

Results showed that Athletes are the atypical student typology that mostly presents extra-academic skills that should be valorised (i.e., item 11;  $p < 0.05$ ), followed by Artists and Workers. Finally, Artists ( $p < 0.0001$ ) and Athletes ( $p < 0.01$ ) resulted the less recognizable student groups in the class (i.e., item 12) with respect to both Workers and Erasmus.

## DISCUSSION

The present study confirmed the hypothesis that the Italian academic system is limited in providing services for a dual career of atypical student-athletes and artists. Furthermore, results substantiated the hypothesis that teachers have a general positive perception of student-athletes, although a lack of awareness regarding their presence in the class emerged. Conversely, findings showed that artists are the least recognized category of atypical students, presenting the lowest accessibility to institutional provisions and availability from the teaching staff.

Although in this study the 10% response rate resulted lower compared to the recommended norms (i.e., Baruch, 1999; Deutskens, Ruyter, Wetzels, & Oosterveld, 2004), the gender, the academic position and the geographical area of respondents resulted similar with respect to a previous study, which used an on-line questionnaire administered to Italian university professors (Guidotti et al., 2012). Despite a high number of participants was expected due to the shortness of the instrument that included only 12-items, it could be speculated that the lack of follow-up contacts influenced the low response rate. Moreover, the increasing academic demands (i.e., lectures, evaluations, reports, research duties, submission of research proposals, administrative duties) posed on Italian university professors in the last years determined their lack of time or interest to participate in the study. Therefore, further studies including a larger sample and follow-up contact administration procedures are strongly recommended.

As expected, the Italian academic system resulted limited in institutional provisions for a flexible academic path (i.e., class attendance and examination schedule) devoted to atypical students. In this framework, Artists and Athletes resulted more disadvantaged with respect to the other recognized atypical student categories (i.e., Erasmus and Worker), corroborating previous studies (Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Henry, 2013). In fact, in presence of rigid academic requirements and in absence of specific policies, individual negotiations between the student-athlete and the teaching staff are common praxis for managing a dual career path. Despite the class attendance is compulsory, university professors may decide to arrange individualized programs to facilitate students with special need to accomplish their academic requirements. The present findings highlighted a general availability of Italian teachers to consider flexible academic paths, mostly related to the class attendance of Workers and Athletes. Conversely, a rigid observation of the examination schedule emerged. Actually, this was an expected result because in Italian universities exams are strictly dictated at institutional level.

With the exception of Erasmus students, a lack of tutoring services and psychological support emerged, in line with the reduced economic resources of the Italian Universities. Conversely at personal level, teachers resulted cooperative in providing proper student services (i.e., additional work in case of missed class attendance, on-line timetable of reception, tutoring, and e learning), especially for Athletes and Workers. Actually, the availability of faculty staff in helping student-athletes during their university experience could determine a relatively strong contribution toward academic success of atypical students (Comeaux, 2005; Comeaux, 2012).

In this framework, Italian university professors could play a crucial role in negotiating a dual career for facilitating the student-athletes' toward the attainment of their degree. However, this availability is still more potential than tangible.

In general, students consider positive the introduction of on-line teaching tools, which allow them a certain flexibility to better organize their own time (Gosper, McNeill, Phillips, Preston, Woo, & Green, 2010). Similarly, Italian teachers considered e-learning fruitful learning instruments in integrating the face-to-face lectures for students not meeting attendance requirements, such as Workers and student-athletes. These findings are in contrast with a previous study highlighting that a lack interactions during class was perceived as disadvantageous for students not physically attending classes, especially when laboratory sessions, group work, discussions or presentations require an active student-teacher interaction (Gosper et al., 2010).

Participants' responses highlighted that atypical students' capabilities developed through informal learning outside the academic environment should be valorised. In particular, a general positive perception emerged toward Athletes, confirming a recognition of sport values that enhance personal qualities such as positive self-perception, commitment, personal organization, and dedication toward a particular goal (Brettschneider, 1999). These findings could determine positive/neutral experiences of student-athletes with their teachers (Comeaux, 2012). Interestingly, the poorest percentages of positive perceptions resulted towards Artists who also devote a considerable dedication and a long-term deliberate practice become expert musician, dancers, painters and actors (Ericsson, 2006). For example, to achieve the expert level elite musicians need to spend around 40-50 h-week<sup>-1</sup> for 20-30 years on music-related activities (Ericsson, 2006). In this framework, a dual career path should be appropriate for all talented individuals in recognition of their relevant efforts in becoming outstanding professionals, often contributing to the prestige of their country.

Despite the positive teachers' perception towards student-athletes, a lack of awareness on the presence of this student typology in class emerged. These findings are quite surprising because respondents were faculty members of Sport Sciences, which could be considered a vocational degree. It could be possible to speculate that the lack of attention toward the figure of student-athletes could be even more severe in the Italian academic system at large. Conversely, Erasmus and Worker students resulted highly recognizable, probably due to the well-established administrative procedures adopted to manage with the necessities of their academic path (European Commission, 2013; Italian Republic, 1970). In this respect, Italian academic institutions should recognize student-athletes to meet the recommendation of the EU guidelines on their dual career (European Commission, 2012) also in considering that in the year 2017 the EU Commission will start monitoring the advancement and impact of policy interventions on dual career in the Member States (European Commission, 2014).

According to Horton (2011), academic institutions should develop a culture that both challenges (i.e., maintain high expectations) and supports (i.e., provide the necessary programs and services) talented students to meet or exceed their own expectations, as well as the expectations of their respective institutions. A prerequisite underpinning this process is to structure national policies that request to activate at local level adequate dual career services for talented atypical students. In this framework, the similarities between Athletes and Workers emerging in the present study could represent a starting point to promote effective strategies and actions in dual career. Furthermore, some virtuous practices at national level should be highlighted as inspiring

approaches for other educational institutions and for the national academic system at large. In particular, the University of Rome Foro Italico and the University of Trento guarantees a dual career path for elite athletes (University of Rome Foro Italico, 2014; University of Trento, 2014) and could represent best practices for the other academic Institutions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study highlighted the positive perceptions of Italian teachers towards atypical students. Although these findings could encourage implementing dual career praxis in Italy, the limitations of the present study call for further research in this scientific area. In particular, future studies should involve a higher number of Italian university professors belonging to different faculties. In fact, teachers belonging to faculties of sport sciences may be more aware of the dual career issues. Furthermore, to increase the number of respondents to the survey, a two-phase data collection (i.e., early send and follow-up contact) is suggested. Finally, cross-national studies are strongly encouraged to provide a comprehensive picture regarding teachers' perceptions of atypical talented students in relation to different dual career policies (Aquilina & Henry, 2010).

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